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ABSTRACT

As a step in considering the addition of dropout statistics to the Common Core of Data (CCD) collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, telephone and personal interviews about the feasibility of implementing a standard national dropout statistics collection were conducted. Interviews were held from May through September of 1990 with different survey instruments for 30 participating states and 24 nonparticipating states. Open-ended and forced-choice questions were included to identify perceived barriers to and incentives for full-scale implementation of dropout statistic collection. Twenty-eight participating states believed that the data collection was feasible for statewide implementation. Nineteen of the non-participants reflected a similar attitude, responding that there were no serious barriers to providing dropout data if such an item was added to the CCD. Major areas to be addressed before adding a dropout statistic to the CCD include: (1) logistical problems in data collection and reporting; (2) problems of complicated and rigorous definition of dropouts; (3) determining the possibility of assessing the status of school leavers with sufficient accuracy to provide a reliable dropout count through school district records; (4) problems of classifying school leavers as dropouts with sufficient comparability when state policies and procedures differ; and (5) determining the effects of differences in operations among state agencies. Four tables present the survey results. (SLD)

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Self Reported Capacity of State Education Agencies to Provide Standard Dropout Data

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This paper is intended to promote the exchange of ideas among researchers and policy makers. The views are those of the authors, and no official support by the U.S. Department of Education is intended or should be inferred.

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Introduction

Background

In 1986, a review conducted by the Council of Chief State School Officers for the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) recommended adding a dropout statistic to the Center's *Common Core of Data* (CCD) survey system (Wittebols, 1986). Subsequent analysis by NCES of state dropout data collections found too many dissimilarities across states to produce a national dropout statistic by summing state counts (Johnson 1988). The need for a uniform national dropout statistic, comparable across states, remained strong, however, and in response NCES initiated cooperative planning with state education agency CCD Coordinators and others to develop a nationally acceptable dropout definition and collection procedure.

Definition of a Dropout

In 1988, NCES and the states agreed tentatively upon the following definition of a school dropout:

A. A dropout is an individual who:
   (1) was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year;
   (2) was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year;
   (3) has not graduated from high school or completed a State- or district-approved educational program, and
   (4) does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions:
      (i) transfer to another public school district, private school, or State- or district-approved education program;
      (ii) temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness, or
      (iii) death.

B. For the purposes of this definition:
   (1) a school year is the 12-month period of time beginning with the normal opening of school in the fall;
   (2) an individual has graduated from high school or completed an approved education program upon receipt of formal recognition from school authorities;
   (3) a State- or district-approved program may include special education programs, home-based instruction, and school-sponsored GED preparation.

Further discussion identified additional dropout characteristics of interest and established ground rules for applying the definition. This process added several factors that were not universally present in existing state dropout definitions. The collection that was field tested in the 1989-90 school year:

- included students in public school grades 7 through 12, regardless of age;
- recorded the sex and racial/ethnic category[1] of dropouts;
- reported dropouts from October 1 through September 30;
- attributed summer dropouts to the grade in which they had been enrolled in the preceding school year;
- counted as dropouts those school leavers whose subsequent status was unknown.

The dropout definition as it was implemented conflicted with current practice in some states (Hoffman, 1990). For example, federal special education school leaver reports consider only those students who formally withdraw from school to be dropouts, reporting "status unknown" as a separate category. Some states are required by their laws to report underage school leavers as truants rather than dropouts. Still other states follow a nine-month calendar that omits summer dropouts, or follow a 12-month July-through-June reporting timeline.

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[1]The categories were those used to report student membership on the CCD: American Indian/Alaskan native; Asian/Pacific islander; Hispanic; black, not Hispanic; white, not Hispanic.

Field Test of Feasibility

During the 1989-90 school year, the NCES dropout definition and collection procedures were field tested in 27 states, the District of Columbia, and American Samoa. Volunteering states received training materials to be used with participating school districts and were reimbursed for their travel to national field test meetings and for a part of the costs of monitoring the project locally. Within each state, NCES specified the number of districts to be selected in various demographic categories (e.g., urban, urban fringe, town, or rural locales). State education agencies selected the participating school districts.

The field test examined three major factors affecting the ultimate feasibility of the proposed dropout collection. These were the ability of school districts to apply the NCES definition; the accuracy with which school districts could distinguish dropouts from other school leavers; and the effects of various membership[2] counts on the size of the denominator used to calculate dropout rates.

The dropout definition in this paper was used throughout the field test, with state and local field test coordinators asked to document problems or anomalies in following the definition. Participating districts were requested to maintain a log of all school leavers during the year, recording each student's status as dropout or other school leaver and describing the documentation on which this judgment was based. Finally, the districts provided membership counts at three separate times: October 1, 1989; the last school day of the 1989-90 field test year; and October 1, 1990. These three dropout rate denominators allowed NCES to examine the potential effects of student migration (net membership gain or loss) on various types of school districts.

Field Test Evaluation

NCES entered into a contract with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to evaluate the results of the dropout statistic field test. The evaluation included site visits to states and school districts, follow-up tracking of school leavers, and a combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews with state education agency personnel. This paper summarizes the results of telephone and personal interviews between AIR researchers and state education agency contacts about the feasibility of implementing a standard national dropout statistics collection. A second, and more detailed, report was prepared by the contractors (Levine and McLaughlin, 1991).

Methodology

The interviews were conducted from mid-May through mid-September of 1990, with different survey instruments for participating and nonparticipating states. Where appropriate, the items asked of both audiences were identical or comparable. The purpose of the interviews was to identify perceived barriers to, and incentives for, full-scale implementation of a dropout statistic collection through the CCD. The CCD collects school-, district-, and state aggregate-level data from state education agency administrative records. Thus, the state education agency would be a key actor in instituting a CCD dropout collection, and should be a knowledgeable informant about the potential problems of doing this. The respondent in the participating states was the dropout field test coordinator. Among the nonparticipating states the respondent was the state dropout coordinator or, if such a position did not exist, the state CCD coordinator. State contacts were mailed a copy of the survey instrument in preparation for the telephone interview. One person chose to answer in writing. All of the 54 education agencies selected (30 participants and 24 nonparticipants) responded. (One of the participating states withdrew after the survey, when it proved impossible to commit the needed staff resources to the field test.)

Analysis of Information

The surveys included open-ended as well as forced choice questions. When an interviewee did not provide an answer to a question, his or her response was recorded as "not applicable," (e.g., question

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[2]In order to establish standard terminology, the CCD surveys define "membership" as the count of students enrolled (or students present plus students absent) on a specified day; typically, October 1 or the closest school day.

about the use of competency test results when state had no such test) or "missing" (e.g., respondent did not know the answer or was unwilling to give an opinion). After declining one follow-up to an initial probe, the respondent was generally not pressed again for an answer.

Analysis here is limited to reporting the number and percent of responses for forced-choice items. Percentages are based on the total pool of possible respondents, including "missing" and "not applicable" answers. Where appropriate, discussion from open-ended questions is added to explain or illustrate other results.

Two caveats should be kept in mind regarding these findings. The first is that they reflect the judgment of a single person, albeit a supposedly knowledgeable one, within each state education agency. While the findings should provide a reasonable inventory of perceived barriers and incentives, they cannot be taken as predictors of state policy decisions. The second caution is that the participating state respondents were interviewed in May and June of the field test year. This was before summer dropouts were reported, and, in some cases, before the end of year membership counts were taken. Participants' estimates of field test burden therefore may be lower than if the interviews had been conducted after the completion of these tasks.

Survey Results

Table 1 reports the respondents' overall estimates of how feasible a standard dropout collection would be. Twenty-eight of the 30 participating states were of the opinion that the data collection they were field testing was feasible for statewide implementation in their state. Nineteen of the 24 nonparticipating states reflected a similar attitude in responding that there were no serious barriers to providing dropout data if such an item were added to the CCD. On the other hand, respondents in six of the 54 states were of the opinion that collecting the NCES (or some other standard) dropout statistic would entail serious difficulties.

Anticipated Problems

The survey asked all respondents how frequently they anticipated a variety of potential problems in collecting and reporting a state dropout statistic. The responses are outlined in table 2. The difficulty seen as most likely (expected to be on "every report" or "very frequent" by 13 respondents) was that of having a high rate of school leavers whose subsequent status was unknown or unverified. The next most commonly expected problems were incomplete or inaccurate lists of school leavers (seven "every report" or "very frequent" responses) and typing or arithmetic errors in reports (seen as potentially "very frequent" by five persons). The two types of errors that reflected systematic incompatibility with existing procedures-- misinterpreting the dropout definition or omitting underage school leavers-- were anticipated to be rare or nonoccuring by more than half of the state contacts.

Dropout Classification Agreement

A major goal of a standard national dropout statistic is to allow equitable and accurate comparisons between states. However, if "a dropout" is conceptually a person who leaves school without satisfying completion requirements, there can never be perfect comparability if states vary in what they require for successful school completion. Table 3 illustrates some of the existing variations.

In 10 states, students who fail a competency test and leave school are dropouts even if they complete coursework requirements for a diploma. But in 25 states this condition is either not applicable (there is no graduation test) or the respondent did not answer the question for some other reason. In nine states a passing score on the *General Education Development* (GED) examinations earns a high school diploma; in 27 states such students are classified as dropouts; and in 11 states some other condition obtains (for example, some districts may allow a school leaver to trade a GED diploma for a regular high school diploma). About half of the respondents (26) said that special education students who met individual education plan requirements different from the regular curriculum were counted as graduates, while 14 respondents said that such students received some other form of recognition. In no state could an individual graduate by completing a high school exit test without satisfying coursework requirements.

However, in three states it was reported that students other than those in special education could graduate by persisting to a specified age or for a specified number of years in school.

The most striking messages in table 3 are the variety across states (in only two cases were half or more of the states in agreement) and the variety or ambiguity within states (in four situations a third or more of the respondents said the outcome was "other" than graduation or dropout, or they did not answer the question).

School Approval

The field test distinguished between approved and unapproved nonpublic schools, counting students who entered the former as transfers, and who entered the latter as dropouts. This distinction could not be maintained in states that do not exercise disapproval over nonpublic schools. Further, a student's status upon transferring to a nonschool setting was contingent upon the receiving institution's capacity to grant a recognized completion certificate. The distinctions are shown on table 4.

Thirteen states do not exercise approval or disapproval of nonpublic schools. In an additional 23 states, such a rating is voluntary, and nonpublic schools may request an evaluation that can lead to approved status. Only 14 states require that nonpublic schools be approved or unapproved by the state. And, while only public and nonpublic secondary schools were authorized to grant a high school diploma in the majority of states, in 14 states the interviewee responded that some additional institution could issue a diploma.

Discussion

These survey results suggest that a national public education dropout statistic such as the one field tested in 1989-90 would be generally feasible to implement. The state education agency interview contacts did not, as a whole, envision serious problems in adopting the proposed CCD collection. This is not to say that there are no issues or difficulties remaining. Further, the frequency of nonresponses is disquieting, implying that the interviewees could not make a judgment call on an issue or that they were not familiar with state practices. There are major areas to be addressed before adding a dropout statistic to the CCD; some of these include the following:

- the logistical burden of collecting and reporting 60 cells of data (6 grades x 2 sexes x 5 racial/ethnic categories) for in excess of 15,000 school districts;
- introducing a complicated and rigorous definition of dropout into these same 15,000 districts;
- determining whether it is possible to assess the status of school leavers with sufficient accuracy to provide a reliable dropout count through school district records;
- classifying school leavers as dropouts with sufficient comparability when state policies and procedures differ;
- determining the effects of what appear to be simple operational problems (e.g., differences in existing state collection schedules, attributing summer dropouts to the grade in which the student was last enrolled) and reconciling these effects when possible.

Additional field test evaluation activities will answer the questions of how accurately school districts can determine the status of students who have left school, and of which membership count provides the best trade-off between accuracy and burden as a denominator for calculating dropout rate. The information discussed in this paper leads to considerable optimism about the potential for furnishing uniform, comparable national dropout statistics within the next few years. It also reinforces the value of conducting formal, collaborative field tests of new data elements and collections.

Table 1..Anticipated feasibility of standard dropout collection: Participating (N=30) and nonparticipating (N=24) states.

	Yes		No		No Response	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Is NCES dropout collection feasible? (participating states)	28	93.3	1	3.3	1	3.3
Serious barriers to standard dropout? (nonparticipating states)	5	20.8	19	79.2	0	0.0
Standard definitions of dropout? (nonparticipating states)	20	83.3	4	16.7	0	0.0

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Table 2.. Expected frequency of serious problems: State contacts (N=54).

	Every Report		Very Frequent		Occasional		Rare		Never		No Response	
	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.
a) High rate of "status unknown leavers"	3	5.6	10	18.5	29	53.7	7	13.0	0	0.0	5	9.3
b) Incomplete/inaccurate leaver lists	1	1.9	6	11.1	16	29.6	19	35.7	2	3.7	10	18.5
c) Duplicate counts of students in membership and dropouts	1	1.9	2	3.7	15	27.8	23	42.6	5	9.3	8	14.8
d) Typing, arithmetic errors	0	0.0	5	9.3	12	22 2	28	51.9	4	7.4	5	9.3
e) Misinterpreted drop-out definitions	1	1.9	2	3.7	14	25.9	28	51.9	3	5.6	6	11.1
f) Omitting underage dropouts	0	0.0	2	3.7	4	7.4	32	59.3	9	16.7	7	13.0
g) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	5.6	5	9.3	0	0.0	46	85.2

Table 3..Classification of school leaver types by state (N=54)

	Graduates		Dropouts		Other		Not applicable		No response	
	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.
a) Completes coursework, fails test	6	11	10	19	15	28	13	24	10	19
b) Not complete course-work, passes test	0	0	18	33	10	19	12	22	14	26
c) Completes alternative criteria (not IEP)	27	50	6	11	7	13	5	9	9	17
d) Persists given time or age	3	6	31	59	10	19	2	4	8	15
e) Completes special education IEP	26	48	2	4	14	26	1	2	11	20
f) Passing score on GED exam	9	17	27	50	11	20	1	2	6	11

Table 4..Position on nonpublic school approval and institution granting secondary degrees as reported by state education agencies (N=54)

	Number	Percent
Position on nonpublic school approval		
(a) Not exercise approval	13	24.1
(b) Approval is voluntary	23	42.6
(c) Approval is mandatory	14	25.9
(d) No response	4	7.4
Institution granting diplomas:		
(a) Public and nonpublic secondary only	37	68.5
(b) Additional institutions beyond secondary	14	25.9
(c) No response	3	5.6

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